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Describing the Circle of Narrative Theory: A Review Essay

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1

The *Routledge Encyclopedia of Narrative Theory*, published under the editorship David Herman, Manfred Jahn, and Marie-Laure Ryan, is more than a new dictionary of narratology.¹ It is an unprecedented work that defines and examines thousands of terms and concepts, distributed in four hundred fifty articles and related to narrative in all its forms and in all the variety of its media, formats, periods, genres, and subgenres. This innovative encyclopedia concerns students, teachers, and researchers, all those who recognize “the very predominance of narrative as a focus of interest across multiple disciplines” (x), whether in history, philosophy, psychology, anthropology, discourse analysis, or literary studies. However, we might consider whether the notion of “theory” here is likely to be a simple metaphor. The list of articles in this very rich volume can be easily divided in historical accounts (on schools or trends, such as the “Tel Aviv School of Narrative Poetics”), methodological accounts (on the different approaches to narrative, from “Computational Approaches to Narrative” to approaches more inspired by the humanities), or lexical accounts (on concepts or notions, more or less linked to the original terminology of such and such author), all accounts of varying length. The volume also contains the presentation of problems, old and new, from plot structure to the literary representation of thought and consciousness, that feed theoretical reflection on narrative.² The editors chose not to devote articles to individual theoreticians (but the bio-bibliographic information concerning them can be accessed through the index).

The ambition of the *Encyclopedia* is not only to present the history, the conceptual and methodological tools, and the terminology of narrative theory or “narrative studies” but first and foremost to underline its importance and topical interest. Apprehending two new phenomena was the main focus for the editors in their work. The first one is well known in the Anglo-Saxon world as the “narrative turn.” In the last twenty years this transformation has put the problematics of narrative at the center of not only historical, ethnographical, and psychoanalytical

thought, but also juridical, political, and even medical, thus endowing narrative theory the status of a new paradigm for knowledge theory. In the article "Narrative Turn in the Humanities," Martin Kreiswirth gives an extensive, rigorous, and well-informed presentation of this phenomenon. His article also contains a number of cross-references to the index or to other entries in the volume (see in particular "Ethnographic Approaches to Narrative," "Historiography," "Law and Narrative," "Medicine and Narrative," "Psychoanalysis and Narrative"). The "narrative turn" and the new uses it defines for the word "story" also form the subject of the first part of Ryan's article "Narrative," which I will come back to. The second phenomenon is the renaissance of narratology in a plural, diversified form: *Narratologies*, significantly, is the title of a collective work published in 1999 under the direction of David Herman. In the introduction to this work, David Herman proposes the term "postclassical narratology," taken up in Luc Herman and Bart Vervaeck's article, "in order to group the various efforts to transcend 'classical' structuralist narratology, which has been reproached for its scientificity, anthropomorphism, disregard for context, and gender-blindness" (450; also see the entries "Implied Reader," "Narrative," "Natural Narratology," "Cultural Studies Approaches to Narrative," "Gender Studies," and "Feminist Narratology"). However, one can wonder, when reading some of the articles in the *Encyclopedia* ("Education and Narrative," "Medicine and Narrative," "Narrative Psychology," "Narrative Therapy," "Theology and Narrative," all of great interest on their own), if the encounter of certain disciplines of the "narrative turn" with the new narratology, with its postclassical and poststructuralist features, is just due to circumstances and if it does not derive from an editorial strategy rather than a true synergy.

Among the most represented disciplines in the *Encyclopedia* are cognitive science and the different disciplines which compose it, always considered in their relation to narration (see "Artificial Intelligence and Narrative," "Biological Foundations of Narrative," "Computational Approaches to Narrative," "Psychological Approaches to Narrative," "Semiotics," etc.). The "narrative turn" in cognitive science is mentioned in Howard Mancing's article on "Biological Foundations of Narrative": "A growing number of neuroscientists, biologists, cognitive psychologists, and philosophers have stressed that the human mind/brain is less a computer than a storyteller" (44). He goes on to quote successively Michael S. Gazzaniga, a neuroscientist; Daniel C. Dennett, a philosopher; Merlin Donald, a psychologist; and Mark Turner, a literary theorist, author of *The Literary Mind*.³ Parallel to this, the cognitive approach to narrative determines a full branch of postclassic narratology, "Cognitive Narratology," which is the subject of an outstanding article in all respects by Manfred Jahn and which is also represented in the *Encyclopedia* by Catherine Emmott ("Narrative Comprehension"), Monika Fludernik ("Experientiality," "Time and Narrative" and, with Jan Alber, "Natural Narratology"), David Herman ("Narrative as Cognitive Instrument," and "Storyworld"), among others. "From a cognitive vantage," Jahn writes at the beginning of his article, "many of the common sense positions of 'classical'

narratology have to be approached with due scepticism" (67). This scepticism—about the postulate of "immanence" or the structural closing of narrative, for example—and the will to put such problems of classical narratology as "Embedding," "Focalization," "Narrative Situations," and "Reliability" into the perspective of cognitive science can be found in almost all articles of narratological inspiration in the *Encyclopedia*. That is also the case of the article "Narrative," one of the longest in the volume. It is signed by Ryan, which at once gives it a manifesto value. In the last part, entitled "Story as Cognitive Construct," after recalling the narratological definition of narrative as a combination of "story" and "discourse," Ryan establishes that only the story can be defined autonomously, differently from the narrative discourse that is defined by its ability to represent that which constitutes story: "Story, like narrative discourse, is a representation, but unlike discourse it is not a representation encoded in material signs. Story is a mental image, a cognitive construct that concerns certain types of entities and relations between these entities. . . . Narrative may be a combination of story and discourse, but it is its ability to evoke stories in the mind that distinguishes narrative discourse from other text-types" (347). Ryan then lists the necessary and/or sufficient conditions for the "story" to exist in the cognitive sense: the image of a world populated with individuated agents (called "characters") and objects; a series of different states of affairs, linked by a nonnatural chain of cause and effect, notably by intentional actions of characters; association of these actions with mental states and events (goals, plans, emotions). (Ryan points out further on that this condition can be flouted in some postmodern novels.) As she says, "The property of being a narrative can be predicated of any semiotic object, whatever the medium, produced with the intention to create a response involving the construction of a story" (347). Ryan is also the author of the article "Media and Narrative," which shows the same quality of information and speculative seriousness (also see all the articles, by various authors, on story in nonverbal media: "Dance and Narrative," "Digital Narrative," "Film Narrative," "Music and Narrative," "Opera," "Photographs," "Pictorial Narrativity," "Television," "Visual Narrativity," etc., as well as those on "Intermediality," "Adaptation," and "Remediation").

As far as narratology is concerned, the *Routledge Encyclopedia of Narrative Theory* attests that all sorts of contextualization have now supplanted the study of textuality (see the articles "Cultural Studies Approaches to Narrative," "Feminist Narratology," "Gender Studies," "Post-Colonialism and Narrative," "Queer Theory"). Thus, in those articles, the *Encyclopedia* may run the risk of redundancy: the article "Gender Studies" for instance, by Gaby Allrath and Marion Gymnich, includes a part entitled "Gendered Narratology," prolonged by another part headed "From the Late 1990s Onwards: Recent Development," which adds very little to the article "Feminist Narratology," also written by a great representative of the area, Robyn Warhol. We can also notice the presence of satellite-articles ("Alterity," "Coming-out Story," "Gaze," "Hybridity," "Slash Fiction"), which sometimes produce involuntary comical effects: "Like all genres, slash is

continually evolving and today the term is widely used to describe female/female (F/F) homoerotic fan fiction as well as male/male. Purists, however, insist that slash refers only to the latter" (536). Beyond these selected remarks, it is particularly difficult for a French reader to express an opinion on the validity, relevance or importance of these approaches or these eclectic "theories."⁴

2

Because academics know, from experience, that dictionaries and encyclopedias are also instruments to construct the reality that they seem to describe, I would like to go a little further in the exploration of the *Encyclopedia*. I will focus here on the narratology (or narrative poetics) part, leaving aside the study of nonliterary forms of narrative.

In this part, the resolutely modernist perspective, indeed avant-gardist, of the *Encyclopedia*, which rejects or keeps a distance from the older research programs qualified as "traditional," is accompanied by a certain lack of perspective and a difficulty in distinguishing between really founding works and mediating works or articles (see for example the article "Historiographic Narratology," which is entirely based on Cohn, chapter 7, or the article "Metalepsis," which without justifying it soundly, asserts the "centrality" of this figure "for narrative theory, placing it alongside metaphor and metonymy" [303]). These are flaws that we can think inevitable and that even the inexperienced reader can easily put right.

But the narratological part of the *Encyclopedia* also clearly appears to be lacking in epistemological reflection, if we mean by that the commonly accepted epistemology: the one attested by notions of hypothesis, test, and falsification.⁵ More often than not, propositions of postclassical narratology, like those of classical structuralist narratology, fall within a kind of spontaneous epistemology, which is also a minimalist epistemology, based on a small number of axioms, such as "the axiomatic narratological dichotomy between *story* and *discourse*" (609), and of primitive terms, such as the term "narrator" defined as the utterer of the story. Consequently, the contradictions that appear when we read the *Encyclopedia* continuously are likely to remain unsolved. What should we think, for instance, of the "Possible World Theory," which is presented in a detailed and reliable manner by Ryan but which also brings forth this remark by David Gorman in the article "Fiction (Theories of)": "Its failure to gain universal acceptance thus far may have something to do with the elaborate metaphysical apparatus it involves—the theoretical question is whether the concept of possible worlds offers the simplest way to explain fictionality" (166). In the same article, Gorman devotes one part and not the least, since it is the last one, to "signposts of fictionality," the identification and description of which have made up and still make up the research program of numerous literary theorists, in spite of John Searle's assertion that "no purely linguistic or textual property of narrative can serve as a criterion of fictionality" (166; also see Searle 65–68). The position adopted here by Gorman completely contradicts the conclusion of the article "Mimesis," by Jean-Marie Schaeffer and Ioana Vultur, who are in line with Searlian theories: "So, the only remaining

possibility seems to be to distinguish fictional and factual narratives in purely functional terms, i.e., in terms of different epistemic and pragmatic uses" (310). Whom should we believe? But the most glaring and important contradiction concerns the narrator-based definition of narrative in classical and postclassical narratologies and the "no-narrator theory" of which Ann Banfield has given the most complete version and which she herself presents in an article of the *Encyclopedia*. The fact is rare enough to be mentioned,⁶ and we may think that Manfred Jahn, author of two journal articles totally or partially devoted to Banfield's works, has suggested her collaboration to the *Encyclopedia*. In his 1992 article, Jahn saw in "Banfield's formidable formalisms" and in her "less than lucid style" the reasons for her being kept in the background by the literary theorists (347). Here she has a relatively brief article, but it has clarity, absence of contradictions, logical consistency, continence in metaphors,⁷ in short all the characteristics proper in general to scientific style. "The 'no-narrator theory,'" she writes, "holds that certain sentences of fiction do not occur in the spoken language and cannot be said to be uttered by a narrator, if that term is understood to denote a first person, either covert or overt" (396).⁸ A sentence in free indirect discourse in the third person is an example of it, linguistic tests showing that it cannot be attributed partly to a character and partly to an utterer or to a covert narrator, without losing its essential characteristics.⁹ The other example of an "unspeakable" sentence is the sentence of pure narrative, marked by the use of the preterite (or *passé simple* in French) and the exclusion of the pair of interlocutors *I/you*. Banfield is here closely akin to Émile Benveniste's analysis of the utterance he calls "historical" (and which Banfield suggests naming "narrative utterance" or more accurately "narration"). Benveniste writes of such a sentence: "No one speaks here; the events seem to narrate themselves. The fundamental tense is the aorist, which is the tense of the event outside the person of a narrator" (208).¹⁰ These considerations form the basis of a linguistic theory of narrative, based on a clear distinction between oral language and written language: "Spoken sentences may lack an explicit I, but they are not speakerless in the relevant sense, the speaker's presence guaranteeing the possibility of *I*. But in writing, the author's relation to text differs from the speaker's to discourse. . . . Rather than 'speaking' in a text, the author creates a fictional world out of language, whether or not this language is attributed to a narrator" (Benveniste 208).

Reading the article "No-Narrator Theory" (which we can complement by reading "Skaz" and "Tense and Narrative," also signed by Banfield) may modify the perception we can have of other articles on narratology in the *Encyclopedia*.¹¹ We can, for example, immediately notice the articles which use the autocontradictory expression "third-person narrator" (see "Mind Style," "Narration,"¹² "Realism (Theories of)," "Reliability"). We also notice that, surprisingly, the notion of narrator always possesses a kind of apodictic obviousness, for instances in the article "Indeterminacy" ("While the narrator of a fictional account is considered responsible for determining what is withheld and

what sequence information is given in . . .” [241]) and in “Speech Representation” (“. . . direct speech in narrative text is best characterised as a rhetorical strategy on the part of the narrator . . .” [559]). It would be wiser to say: “the narrator, when there is one . . .” Finally we deplore the confusion between the functions of the author and the narrator—this “I” which the author quotes—in almost all articles in the *Encyclopedia*. I will only give a few examples: “Ryan breaks the concept of narrator down into three underlying functions: the creative (the narrator’s shaping of the story through the management of technique; see NARRATIVE TECHNIQUES) . . .” (“Narrator” 388); “Palmer (2004) argues that the construction of the minds of fictional characters by narrators and readers are central to our understanding of how novels work . . .” (“Thought and Consciousness Representation (Literature)” 606); “Mind-style is typically a matter of the narrator’s use of language to imitate in an implicit way the structure of the character’s mental self” (“Mind-Style” 311). Concerning the last article mentioned, we cannot be convinced by the comment made there by Dan Shen on this passage in William Golding’s *The Inheritors*, one of the rare extracts of a literary text quoted in the *Encyclopedia*:

The bushes twitched again. Lok steadied by the tree and gazed. A head and a chest faced him, half-hidden. . . . A stick rose upright and there was a lump of bone in the middle. . . . The stick began to grow shorter at both ends. Then it shot out to full length again.

Shen’s comment is as follows: “Here, the modern narrator uses the protagonist Lok’s primitive world-view to transmit the story. From Lok’s perspective, a man’s raising a bow is perceived as ‘A stick rose upright,’ and the man’s drawing the bow as ‘The stick began to grow shorter at both ends,’” and so on (311). If the quoted passage actually expresses the point of view of the protagonist Lok (though here it appears to be a “narrated” point of view which does not go as far as the enunciative shift proper to the expression of “represented speech and thought”¹³), what linguistic evidence do we have of the presence of the point of view of a narrator? All the sentences in the text belong to the narrative chain in the preterite (in the *passé simple* in French, except for “faced” and “there was,” which are translated in the *imparfait*); the story seems to tell itself; in other words, it can be understood without the mediation of a narratorial point of view.¹⁴

This is not only a terminological problem (unless the question of terminology in theories, narrative or others, is taken very seriously); the whole narrative theory in classical and postclassical narratology must be reconsidered. The propositions of narratology are valid only in the case of narration in the first person and, when we adopt its approach to the narratives, we become unable to perceive other forms and other narrative effects that some authors have particularly attempted to obtain (I am talking here less about Golding, who may have not deserved as much, than about authors from the “modernist” movement: James Joyce, Virginia Woolf, William Faulkner, Malcolm Lowry, and others). The ignorance or dissimulation of this fact, as well as the absence in the index of the name of S.-Y. Kuroda, who was the first to denote the “communicational” theory of narration,¹⁵ very clearly attests

to the project of linguistic and literary recovery which the *Encyclopedia* supports: recovery of the theory of language, including that of literary language, as communication, reinforced by pragmatics and “communication studies” (see the articles “Linguistic Approaches to Narrative,” “Pragmatics,” “Discourse Analysis (Linguistics),” “Conversational Storytelling,” “Communication Studies and Narrative,” “Communication in Narrative,” “Natural Narratology”). In Kuroda’s works, the communicational theory of narration, influenced by the communicational theory of language, was rejected in favor of a “poetic” theory of narration, which only presupposed the activity of the writer. There was in it an attempt all the more interesting since it allowed highlighting the cognitive aspect of language, its central role as instrument of knowledge, representation, aesthetic expression.¹⁶ In the *Encyclopedia*, Banfield is the only theoretician to present literature and particularly narrative literature as a specific experience of the possible form or forms of language—consequently, as what cannot be adapted or transposed in the media.

Notes

¹ See Prince.

² Some of these articles are actually essays in which the authors give the results of extensive research. They come with a bibliography which can contain up to fifteen titles.

³ To mention the name of a literary theorist in an article in cognitive science is an exception (which has to do with the fact that Mancing himself is a theorist of literary narrative). Generally, bibliographies for articles signed respectively by cognitivists and by narratologists do not match up. Manfred Jahn, in the article “Cognitive Narratology,” speaks about “fortuitous coincidence” rather than “systematic exchange or exploration” between the “narrative turn” in cognitive science and the “cognitive turn” in narratology (67).

⁴ The article “Feminist Narratology” mentions the doubts expressed by Nilli Diengott concerning the “narratological” or more generally “theoretical” feature of feminist narratology.

⁵ Some articles, however, echo the epistemological criticisms expressed towards some theories (see “Interdisciplinary Approaches to Narrative,” on Bortolussi and Dixon’s *Psychonarratology*; or “Natural Narratology,” on Fludernik’s *Towards a Natural Narratology*). See as well this remark by Luc Herman and Bart Vervaeck in “Postclassical Narratology”: “The identification of structuralism as the classical age of narratology might be contested, especially by empirically oriented scholars, who have always rejected the lack of testing typical of structuralist endeavour” (451).

⁶ No entry devoted to Banfield’s theory can be found in Prince’s *Dictionary of Narratology*, for example.

⁷ This is not the case, for example, of the article “Narrator,” by James Phelan and Wayne C. Booth.

⁸ The term *no-narrator theory* does not come from Banfield, who speaks more generally of narrative theory (that explains her use of quotation marks).

⁹ The choice of the term *free indirect discourse* is a consequence of the harmonization of vocabulary imposed by the editors of the *Encyclopedia*. For reasons that it would be too long to rehearse here, Banfield prefers to say “represented speech and thought” or “represented consciousness.” It can be noticed that the article “Dual-Voice Hypothesis,” by Brian McHale, author in 1983 of a controversial article on Banfield, often quoted since, pays a tribute to Banfield’s powerful argumentation, partially taken up by Monika Fludernik in her *Fictions of Language* and “New Wine in Old Bottles.”

¹⁰ I would like to point out that some articles of the *Encyclopedia* subject Benveniste’s thought to a distortion by establishing a connection between it and the narratological dichotomy between “story” and “discourse,” a dichotomy that has nothing to do with it (see “Speech Representation,” “Structuralist Narratology,” “Time and Narrative”).

¹¹ I am using the term *narratology* in the broad sense of “theory of literary narrative.” It should be clear that Banfield’s theory cannot be subsumed under the term in the strict sense of the word. See note 5 above.

¹² The expression “anonymous third-person narrator” is used here to account for the beginning of Joseph Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness*, which I quote: “The *Nellie*, a cruising yawl, swung to her anchor without a flutter of the sails, and was at rest. The flood had made, the wind was nearly calm, and being bound down the river, the only thing for it was to come to and wait for the turn of the tide. The sea-reach of the Thames stretched before *us* like the beginning of an interminable waterway. . . . The Director of Companies was *our* captain and *our* host. *We* four affectionately watched his back as he stood in the bows looking to seaward” (my emphasis).

¹³ Characterized by the combination of preterite or past progressive (of the *imparfait* in French) with deictics of the present such as “now” (see Banfield, *Unspeakable Sentences* ch. 2; and in the *Encyclopedia*, “Tense and Narrative” 593).

¹⁴ We could make the same remarks about the article “Thought and Consciousness Representation (Literature),” in which Alan Palmer adopts the model of the dual voice in free indirect discourse in a noncritical way, as well as about the also highly problematic notion of omniscient narrator.

¹⁵ See Kuroda, “Reflections” 107ff. A theory that defines the story as an act of language by a narrator is a communicational theory of narration.

¹⁶ See the preface by Nicolas Ruwet to the French edition of a collection of essays by Kuroda.

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